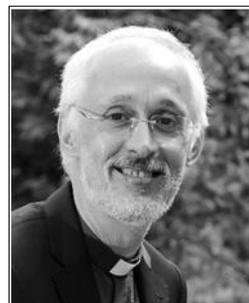


## The Church's response to tragedy

We have seen a number of tragedies take place in this country over the last few weeks and the church has played a key role in helping people to deal with what has happened. At the June Diocesan Synod, Bishop David spoke movingly about what we have been through here in Manchester following the Arena bombing. He also helped us to think about what the church must take from the tragedy and his words were not just for those of us in Diocesan Synod but for us in each and every congregation, so I'd like to share some of what he said with you in his Presidential Address:



"Over these last weeks, we have seen vividly that the Church has a key role to play in a time of public grief. Some of that response has been explicit. I am grateful to all who responded to my request to open up their buildings on the day after the bomb. Many members of the public have come into church to say a prayer or to reflect quietly. It is apparent that when things happen so outside of the run of normal life, we are drawn back to the basic values and to the core identity that shapes us.



*David Walker,  
Bishop of Manchester*

There have also been opportunities to "give account of the hope that is within us". I soon lost count of how many times I was asked, both by individuals and on live news broadcasts, where God was in the tragedy. It was a privilege to be able to speak of Christ on the Cross, the one who knows suffering and who is closer to us than any human comforter.

The task has been to articulate how to respond well to an atrocity, with lessons drawn from the core of the Christian gospel, but where making the link visible would have detracted from its effectiveness. When I lit the first candle in Albert Square, on the Tuesday evening after the attack, I spoke of the light that shines in the darkness and will overcome it. Adding the words, "John, Chapter 1, verse 5", would have given the impression that this was a teaching for Christians alone. You and I believe that the Good News is for all. By the following morning, the city centre was full of candles, shining bravely in the dawn light.



When I spoke of how Manchester could channel its very proper anger against terrorism by refusing to allow those who perpetrate such deeds to change the way we live and create divisions between us, I didn't need to quote scriptures about turning the other cheek, or heaping burning coals on the heads of our enemies. Yet those are the verses from which I draw the strength to dare to utter such words. Thank God that in the days that followed we saw a city full of its natural vitality. By the weekend people were making a reverential stop in St Ann's Square, laying flowers, signing the condolence book in the church, or simply standing in respectful silence. Then they were going on to fill the bars, restaurants and clubs as on any other weekend. The concert at the cricket ground, not quite a fortnight after the bomb, was an amazing example of Manchester sending a clear message to terrorism that we remain undaunted. For many of those who had been at the first concert, the chance to meet again,

and enjoy the music of their favourites, has played an important role in healing the mental scars of the Monday night.

Back on that first Tuesday evening, it seemed that there was one absolutely core message to get out. Found once more at its clearest in the writings of St John, it is the determined assertion that there is a choice to be made, and the choice lies between love and hate.

"Those who live in love live in God, and God lives in them", the Saint says. There is nothing trite about inviting a city that has experienced a direct attack to choose love. Perhaps most moving have been the statements from the families of some of the victims, where the same words have come with an especial force. I have seen many simple acts of love in Manchester over these recent days. And in meetings with colleagues and others nationally, it has been made clear to me that Manchester's message has been heard far and wide.

It has been my particular privilege to be called to speak out of our shared faith, on behalf of Manchester, to the city and far beyond. All of this has been possible, not because we can demand of society that we are accorded such a place, but because of the constant work and effort that we put into knowing and serving our communities, week in and year out. Every shift in a Foodbank, every night spent as part of a town centre street pastors or angels shift, every meal served or bed offered in a winter night shelter, these have been the coinage of our credibility, the proof of our care for Manchester, not just when an atrocity happens, but every hour of every day of every week of every month of every year. Alongside these practical offerings of Christian love lie the hours spent working alongside civil society leaders and organisations and with those who represent different traditions of faith. The relationships I have been able to draw on in these last weeks are built on the solid efforts of priests and people across the diocese, both our own efforts and those of our predecessors.

We are now at a hinge point in the sequence of events. The world's media has moved on, families are holding their funerals, many of the most seriously injured are moving towards and beyond release from hospital. Not yet, but soon, it will be time to think on how the powerful response of Manchester to the immediate aftermath of the attack can form the ground for a Manchester-grown response to the wider challenges with which terrorism, and the geopolitical situation, face us. I do believe that there is an opportunity for this city and its surrounds to become a world leader in this, just as we have over two hundred years in so many other aspects of forging a better society."

Bishop David concluded by saying that the solution to bring about a hope filled future will not be solely a political one, but rests with everyone.

May we, here in Droylsden, take up this role gladly and play our part in building communities where love, peace and hope can flourish, where the voices of all are heard and valued, where there is no room for hatred and division. As we do this, and in the words of Bishop David which ended his talk, may God bless Manchester!

*Revd Jo Farnworth*